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Folklife Archives Project 476: Dark Fire Tobacco Barns
Interview with Tommy Paschall (B2, F1)

Interviewer: John Morgan

Interviewee: Tommy Paschall

Project: Dark-Fire Tobacco Barn Project

Date: September 25, 1992

Location:

Transcriber: David Puglia

Note From Transcriber:

a. Interviewee Tommy Paschall is abbreviated TP.

Interviewer John Morgan is abbreviated JM.

b. An ellipsis indicates a sentence that is unfinished due to interruption. A dash indicates a sentence that is unfinished due to change of thought.

c. Square brackets are used to indicate additional information not taken directly from the words of the interviewer or interviewee.

Parentheses are used to indicate nonverbal actions.

d. In parentheses "laughs" means laughter by a single individual, "laughter" means laughter by both parties, and "chuckles" means the beginning of laughter that occurred while the speaker continued to speak.

e. Filler words such as "um," and "uh," were removed if I felt they detracted from the intelligibility of the sentence. Filler phrases such as "you know" were kept when possible.

Disclaimer: This transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing the event.

[Begin transcription]

JM: Okay, well it sounds like we got some kind of level. I'm talking the way I want to. If you would say something Tommy. This is a test you can say anything.

TP: Alright. One, two, three, four.

JM: Okay, well I got to make an announce here, which is just to announce the tape. Today's date is Friday September 25th. We're in the kitchen of Albert and Linda Smith. My name's John Morgan. I'll be conducting the interview with Tommy Paschall. Is that Tommy with a "y"?

TP: T-O-M-M-Y

JM: Okay.

Camera Operator: Before we get going here John, tell me what I'm going to do here.

JM: If you press the red button...

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Camera Operator: Well, I just turned it off.

JM: Oh (laughs). Alright, we're going to stop the tape here for a second. [stops tape] Ok, after minor technical difficulties with the video camera behind me (laughter) before we got this going. So we'll restart the interview with Tommy Paschall, and I already said the date, September 25th. The purpose of the interview again is to talk about the process of dark-firing tobacco, but what I want to ask you first is about the barns, and these classic barns, these tall, look like slender barns. And some of them are log here. The big question is why do you think the barns are built like they are.

TP: I think it was cheaper to build them, at that time, for the fire and say you got to bring in slabs and saw dust and back years ago in the 1800's there weren't sawmills around and they didn't have that much dust, they had to fire with just old rotten wood and stuff, and rather than have a barn covering an acre and spread out with one tier or one level to put it all on, they could use less wood and stuff if they ran up.

JM: So in other words, the base of the barn, the floor of the barn was smaller, so they would make it taller.

TP: So they wouldn't have to use as much wood, and like I said, back in the 1800's, they didn't have dust. And then it stayed on and they kept doing that until recently now the newer barns built in the last ten or fifteen years they've started kind of coming down with them, only making them like two tiers high, because they've got tractors and loaders and you can drive in, you don't have to pack all the wood in.

JM: Right, so the barn type, that was one question I had. Are they building this same type of barn, or are they building a different looking barn?

TP: They building mostly a different looking barn, but if you go down the road go out that way when you leave you'll see one smoking that Mark Paschall's just built that's two tiers I think, and it's probably twice as big as this house area.

JM: Right.

TP: And they're firing it like that because they can take the wood and sawdust in with a tractor, and they don't have to pack it in by hand.

JM: They can haul it in.

TP: Yeah.

JM: So it's...

TP: I mean you start trying to fire out a barn to put an acre in that you only had one tier it would cover a spot as big as this house, and just think about how much wood you

would have to - because you have to have wood under most all of it, and you'd have to pack that much in by hand.

JM: And I guess the smoke rises?

TP: Smoke rises up and comes out. They've got ventilators at the top and the bottom. Now the old log barns like this and that here probably haven't got a ventilator at the bottom, but what they probably did is let the door plank down. There's plank at the bottom of door on each end, when you're firing in it, and you can lay that down and let it draw from the bottom. And then they've got a ventilator at the eave, right at the top of the barn where the smoke come out. And once you get the tobacco in there and get it started it will draw right to it. It works just like a chimney.

JM: So you've got a - I'll try to get this clear in my mind. You got a draft down at the bottom of the barn, and there's some place to draw in...

TP: Someplace to draw in...

JM: Draw in the air. And then at the top, somewhere, and you said under the eaves.

TP: Well, no, it's actually up at the top, right in the crown. There's usually a hole in each end of the barn right at the top.

JM: Oh ok.

TP: Now you haven't asked me about the firing yet. I'll have to explain that to you, but you used to draft more area when you're putting finish on, which is just putting smoke on the tobacco to make it a darker or - to have more shine, you probably close those off, because you want to hold smoke in there, as much as possible.

[5:00]

JM: So I'll get around to process, I don't want us to scatter too much here, but - so they're really not building the log types, and they're not even really building that tall slender type anymore, are they?

TP: Not that much, there's still a few built. There's not that many barns built. I mean they cut tobacco ???, and are probably going to eventually do away with the program all together. The only reason there's any built at all is they keep burning. Of course you fire in a barn, and every year one or two will burn, because just for a stick falls or a man's careless or the wind gets it, or anything can happen. You figure if you got fire, you build anywhere from eight to twelve fires each year in that barn, a man's doing ten barns, sooner or later he's probably going to burn one.

JM: [laughs] So two or of them burn down every year, and that's just right around this area that you know about.

TP: Well dark-fire tobacco is a small process, there's not like five counties here and then there's what they call the eastern district which is around Nashville and Hopkinsville, around in there, and that's small too, and that's all there is that I know of. Now there's a Virginia fire-cured, which is a little different, it's similar, but it's not exactly like it.

JM: That would be sort of like the flue-cured?

TP: Yeah, it's similar to flue cured.

JM: So I mean well they have not building down, have you ever helped build this kind of barn?

TP: No, all the barns I use were on my place in my granddaddy's time.

JM: Right. So they were there. They were there when your grandfather was there.

TP: Yeah, I think, I remember. My grandfather I don't remember, but I think I remember my dad saying that my grandfather could remember helping building one of them, but the others were there when he remembers, and he got the farm from his daddy. I don't know. I don't really know when they were built.

JM: Could you guess about when that was? When your grandfather was operating the farm?

TP: My grandfather would have been operating in the late eighteen, early nineteen hundreds. But my barns are not log. They were built before that. My barns are wood. They're frame. Yeah.

JM: So you're talking about frame barns.

TP: They're not logs. Logs were built even before that.

JM: Is that right? So you're guessing they were built before the end of the 19th century?

TP: I'm saying the log barns, my guess would be, and I have no doubt that log barns were built in the late seventeen or early eighteen hundreds.

JM: Oh really? That early? You think?

TP: I think so. That's just a guess.

JM: Ok. Yeah, that's good. But I mean I know there's still some log ones around here, still some active log ones around here.

TP: Yeah.

JM: People are still using some of the log barns.

TP: Yeah.

JM: Do you know anyone who is?

TP: I was talking to somebody the other day that was using a log barn, and I saw one the other day that was smoking, but I didn't know whose it was. And I can't think of one right now. I've got a couple. I've got two that I got air-cured in, but I'm not firing in it.

JM: Right. Right.

TP: A lot of people also, a lot of people rent barns. I mean just like any other farming fifty years ago there was, whatever, twenty-five farmers now there's five. So a lot of the farms that people don't farm, the other farmers tend their farms and rent the barns from them, and a lot of the people that own these old log barns like Albert here don't want people to fire in them anymore, so they don't rent them out.

JM: They don't want the risk of them going up in smoke?

TP: Yeah, they don't want the risk of burning the old barn.

JM: Well it is risky. There's a special process to it. Maybe you can just sort of describe to me what you have to do fire a barn. I mean if you can, why don't we back up, I know the tobacco is staked pretty much like air cured and hung in the barn, so I know that much about it, that that's true.

TP: That's true. The only difference in it and air cured ??? is you can hang it a little close because you're going to fire it. See air cured the air has got to get around it more than in the dark since you going to build a fire and have heat in there you can put it a little closer in the barn.

JM: So you can put the sticks...

TP: The sticks closer. You can put them six to eight inches, whereas in air-cured you got to put them wider than that.

JM: And then the typical barn you're firing now, let me get this straight before we move on to the firing part, how many tiers up does it go?

TP: Five, usually four or five up to where the roof starts slanting, and then usually two collar beams, they call them collar beams. I have no idea...

JM: Collar beams. Those would be the ones that are above the eaves, they move up into the crown of the...

[10:00]

TP: And they gradually go up and get shorter, each one as you go up.

JM: Right. Right.

TP: So, seven or eight, counting the eaves.

JM: But you stack from the top down, do you hand up?

TP: You can do it either way. You hand it up in the barn and there's usually two people, sometimes three, in the barn, depending on how tall it is, standing on the tiers or collar beams, and you can either start at the top and run down or start at the bottom and run up, or if you can, well if you've got a crew of hands that's working it all their lives, the best way to do it is first, third, and fifth, and then second, forth, and sixth, because it staggers. But, mostly we don't have that many hands that can work it anymore, and it's hard to teach somebody to do that. It's just hard for them...

JM: So it's getting harder to find people who know how to do it?

TP: It's getting nearly impossible to find people who know how to do it and want to work.

JM: And willing to work?

TP: Yeah.

JM: It's hard work isn't it?

TP: Yeah. It's hard work. Tobacco's hard work. Period. Any. All of it.

JM: Well I mean, it's not just this time of the year. I mean it's basically you start and stop almost back to back, don't you?

TP: Well know, floats, which is a completely different thing, which is hydroponic farming, that's like five years, it's only been around four or five years. And instead of using plant beds, they use floats and grow them on hydroponic, or a lot of them are. So you start that in April, March April, and then you sell in January. Because you get through stripping and sell in January.

JM: So with this hydroponic system now, the seedlings are put in - I mean they're grown in water.

TP: They're grown in water. They're grown in floats on water. Yes.

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JM: But the old process, I mean...

TP: You usually fixed beds in the fall, and then sold them in February.

JM: In February?

TP: A lot of the old farmers wanted to sell their early beds on Valentine's Day. Now I don't know why.

JM: Is that right? Valentine's Day is when they sold their beds?

TP: If it was possible. I've seen some of them rake snow off to do it.

JM: Is that right? (laughs)

TP: I don't know why. I can't say it made any difference, but that's what they did.

JM: And then not to mention all the weeding and tending that went on between, you'd usually harvest dark-fire about when?

TP: Usually from the last of July, the earliest in the county would go, there would be people harvesting when it frost.

JM: Up to the frost, right? Is that right?

TP: Mhmm.

JM: Ok, well you've got it harvested, you got it staked, you got it on the wagon, you got it back to the barn, and you told us how you stack it in there.

TP: Yeah, it'll take two, if you got flat wagons, flats wagons and staff wagons are two completely different things, so that's another thing you got to get into. But if you got flat wagons, you figured two on the ground and three - five men can run the barn.

JM: With flat?

TP: Yeah that's where you stake it and leave it sitting on scaffolds in the field and then load it on the flat wagon and take and take it in.

JM: Yeah

TP: Scaffold wagons you probably need six if they'll go in the barn.

JM: If you can fit those big scaffold wagons...

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TP: Yeah, in the new barns of course you can, but a lot of the old barns were built when they had teams. Horses.

JM: So you just have to hand them through the door, right?

TP: Then you need seven or eight.

JM: Right. So the newer barns they're trying to make the doors wider to accommodate.

TP: Right.

JM: Ok. Well let's get to the perhaps most unusual part of dark-firing, and that is the fire building. (laughs)

TP: Yeah.

JM: If you can, try to describe that to me.

TP: In the old barns, the average barns, you take three runs. When you go in the barn, the tiers run crossways. Ok, you run three rungs the same was as doors. One in the middle, and one on each side of slabs, like just slabs off a saw mill.

JM: Right.

TP: And then cover them with saw dust, depending on the first fires, the first two fires you trying to bring colors through. You've got - that's the most technical part.

JM: You're trying to bring what?

TP: The color through.

JM: Trying to bring the color through.

TP: Yes, the proper color.

JM: Ok.

TP: If you get it too hot, it will green it. It dries it out green.

JM: Mmmm...

TP: It'll be just like your jacket, or greener.

JM: I have a sort of olive green jacket on.

[15:00]

TP: If you don't get enough heat, if you just get a little smoke and not enough heat, it'll mold, or rot, or sweat. They call it sweat. What it does it makes it just like an old leaf out in the yard. It just doesn't have any - you grab the leaf and pull on it, and it just tears. It doesn't have any life to it. So the first two fires are brining the color through, and you got to get them hot enough to keep them from sweating, but if you get them too hot like I said, they'll green and dried out green. And every barn and every year is different, I don't know why. That's just something you have to learn. That's the hard part. It just takes experience. There's not the way - I can take you in the barn and say it needs to do this and I can't teach you because - I still mess up sometimes.

JM: (laughs) Is that right?

TP: Yeah.

JM: It's dependent on what? The weather?

TP: Of course the bigger the tobacco is the more it'll sweat. The more it's rained this year the more sap it will have in it, the more it will sweat, the more heat you'll have to use to get it through. If it's a real dry year, and it's small tobacco, it won't have any sap in it at all, and it's hard to keep it in order. Hard to keep it enough to keep it from going green. Or if it's a wet year like this one, when it's got a lot of sap in it, it's hard - I mean you have to worry about getting enough smoke and heat in it to keep it from rotting.

JM: Right. So this has been a wet...

TP: This has been a very wet year. This is one of the wettest years we've had...

JM: Even though I guess the weather people were say were eight inches short but it's when the rain happens?

TP: This particularly county has been wet. I mean I don't know - statewide it may be eight inches short, but this county has been way over.

JM: Right. So that's probably your worst problem.

TP: Of course it made a good crop. You know we had plenty of water. We've got a lot of sass, but you know the firing. Then that's the hardest part of the firing, the first two fires, is getting the color through like I said without it sweating or greening, then the third and fourth fire probably, or the third anyway, after you've got the color through, which I've got, I can tell you I've got a barn like that that I've just set the color to. I've also got a shed that I'm just still bringing it through. We built them this morning.

JM: Right.

TP: After you get the color through the next thing is getting the stem down. If you don't get enough heat in there to get the stem down, it'll mold.

JM: Get the stem down? What...

TP: Dry the stem down.

JM: Dry the stem. So taking any of the moisture out of the stem. Okay.

TP: If you don't get enough heat, it'll mold. You just need to build a hot fire is basically what you need to do. I use, in my first fires, I use a small amount of wood and a small amount of saw dust, is the way I do it. Now different people have different ways. I mean, they either learn from their parents or they learn from experience or whatever, but they have different ways of doing it.

JM: Right. And where did you learn it from?

TP: Well my whole - I mean my father and grandfather and great-grandfather farmed. I learned a lot from my father, and then I learned from experience. I just make a lot mistakes. (laughter)

JM: So can you guess how many generations dark-fire tobacco goes back in your family?

TP: I don't know. My great-grandfather got killed when he was young, so I don't whether my great-great-grandfather - I've never heard anybody say - I know he owned the farm. So I'm going to guess he raised tobacco, but I don't know.

JM: So at least back to your great-grandfather?

TP: Yeah.

JM: So now your son is standing over here to the left, and he's involved in it, so we can say probably five generations at least.

TP: He's involved in it. I don't know, like I said, how long it's going to be around.

JM: But up to date, we got probably at least five generations.

TP: We're trying to diversify out into others things, peppers and tomatoes and stuff. But yeah, he's involved in it some too.

JM: Well, I'm really interested in the way you lay the fire out. I mean you've told me that in the smaller barn you've got three strips, one right down the center, two on each side. And then you said you brought in slabs.

TP: Ok, that's what you light a fire. You light slabs, two slabs - Normally I lay two slabs like this with bark down. You figure that was the bark.

JM: Ok. Mr. Paschall's got his two hands down.

TP: I don't know whether I can say on the camera.

JM: That's alright. I'll talk. He's got his hands out, palms up, and he lays them two slabs, bark down.

[20:00]

TP: Bark down. Normally the reason I lay them bark down is because my father taught me to (laughs). But the bark flames. You don't want the flames.

JM: So you lay slabs, and the slabs are about what? How wide would you estimate each slab is? I know they're different. Six to eight inches.

JM: Six to eight inches wide. Ok. And you get these slabs from?

TP: Sawmills.

JM: Sawmills. Alright what's next?

TP: Then you, I usually lay strips. Which are just the same thing. I mean it's when they cut logs at the sawmill, they usually have every once in a while a bundle of strips come off too. And I usually lay them in the middle, where the gap is in the slabs.

JM: In between the two slabs?

TP: Yeah.

JM: Ok.

TP: And then cover it with sawdust. Like I said on the first fires I don't lay as many slabs or much dust, than when you're trying to bring it to color, and then when you're trying to get the heat, you put more slabs and still very little dust, that way it will burn faster, of course, you got more heat in to bring your stems down. Then on the finish fires, which ???, because that's like the last five, four or five fires. All that does is put more color and make it brighter, more finished. The more smoke you put on it, it's gets stickier and it sticks to it, and it just makes it a brighter colored tobacco. Darker.

JM: I've heard people refer to the finish before, but I...

TP: Shine. It looks - what it looks like is it looks varnish. If you get a lot of finish on it. I mean if you would - the time for you all to come up here if you had a chance would be during sales. Then you could see it.

JM: Sales is when?

TP: It's January. January, February.

JM: I'll try to make it back up here.

TP: You can tell the difference in a pair of tobacco that's been fired good and what hasn't. It'll just be almost shiny, like it's varnished on it. And that's just smoke. It's smoke where they've burnt. Yeah, ??? sticks to it or whatever. I mean it just keeps sticking on it and gets more and more. The best thing is green wood. Green like gum, or anything like that, if you can get it to burn, when you're putting finish on.

JM: Green gum wood if you can get it?

TP: Yeah, people use - I've known people to put salt in it. I never did understand why. The only thing I can figure out about salt is it might hold order in the tobacco. I don't know. Of course the more order - the order - do you what order means?

JM: No (laughs) I don't know what order means.

TP: I was afraid you didn't. I could tell by your confused look.

JM: You'll have to explain order to me.

TP: Okay. Order is if you look out there and pick up a leaf that's not in order it will crumble. If it's in order it's pliable, it's wet-damp. Not wet, but it's damp. It'll...

JM: And this is after the firing process.

TP: Yeah. During it or after the firing process. Yes. You have to get in back in order to get it down. I mean when you get it fired out, when it's powdered dry, if you touch it, it'll just break all to pieces. You have to have some kind of pliability to get it back down out of the barn.

JM: Well sure. Yeah. Right. Okay. So that's...

JM: That's a whole different thing.

TP: That's a whole different process.

JM: Let me get back to the fire itself because I think that's what - from my own personal experience, different people do it different ways. I even heard a fellow was telling me

just the other day about how there's some people here in Calloway County that have these secret recipes [laughs].

TP: Well they use - that's what I was going to say. They use different things to put on for the finish part especially. They put - some people put different things on the slabs and on the sawdust that they think will - which it may do it - that they think will help put the finish on. Make it stickier, either stickier, or make it darker, or make more smoke. Anything like that. Put more finish on.

JM: So you have heard of these secret recipes.

TP: Oh yeah.

JM: Those are just probably individual things down through the families.

TP: I've had - I've tried one or two things. I never did think - now I think green wood and green sawdust does as much as anything, but I have put different things on top of the wood to try to just put a little more finish on.

JM: Ok.

TP: If you can get sticky like - that's what grain wood does - or gum especially, gum's sticky. It'll make a sticky on the - it'll make the leaf kind of sticky and then more smoke will stick to it.

JM: Right. So you have experimented. And just to summarize you believe green wood and green sawdust probably gives it the best finish.

[25:00]

TP: Well it'll do as good as anything else I think. And a lot of fire, it just takes a lot. That's another thing. Some years, and I don't know why that is. Some years, three fires you can finish out a barn good, and some years you can just build fires and build fires and build fires, and it never does take finish good. I don't know why that is. I mean - it's something to do with the condition of the tobacco I would say, but I don't know.

JM: Let me ask one detail question, and it's again has to do with fire, and this is for doing comparison here. You've got the slabs, you've described well how you lay out the slabs, and how you put kindling or something in between it. Where do you set the fires in those three rows?

TP: I usually set my first fires when I'm bringing the color through, which is the most important ones, I mean as far as you can...

JM: You consider that most important?

TP: Well yeah you can have a good crop of tobacco in the field and ruin it in five days in the barn. I mean you can rot it, or you can green it. And if you do either one. Well if you rot it, it's ruined. If you sweat it bad, it'll have sweat spots on it, and it'll be - it's just ruined. It won't have any life like I said, if you all have time I'll try to show you some later that's either dead or just got life, and you'll see what I'm talking about. Or if you green it sometimes you can take the green out, but it's hard to do. If you dried it out green, it's hard to ever get it to run back.

JM: So you got your first fire laid out. Where do you actually start the fires? And what do you start them with?

TP: On those I generally start two side rungs, I've got three rungs there. The two side rungs I start at each corner, because that's the place that's hardest to get smoked. So that's where I start it. And the center rung, I start in the center, because there's more tobacco and it'll cover more. So I start five fires too. Actually I start six because the center rung, you're starting the center rung both ways.

JM: Then you start piling on the saw dust?

TP: The sawdust you just cover the wood with sawdust before you ever start the fires. You just leave a whole - I just leave a spot where I'm going to start the fires.

JM: So you cover - you've laid out the slabs, you've laid the kindling in the middle, you put sawdust in, but then you leave little openings...

TP: Little opening where I'm going to start the fires.

JM: Where you're going to set the fires.

TP: See all the saw dust does is keep the wood from flaming and it just holds it down where it'll go slow and smoke. That's why when you're wanting the heat, like to bring the slabs down, you use less sawdust, and it'll burn a lot faster.

JM: Then will the fire run up and down those lines?

TP: It runs slow. It burns slow. You can build like a finish fire when you're building a slow fire. You've got probably quite a bit of wood and a lot of sawdust on it. It'll burn for weeks sometimes.

JM: Do you have to leave any kind of opening - do you actually cover up the flames, or do you just leave that opening there?

TP: I stay until the flames burn down. And then it'll just - it won't flame. It shouldn't if you do it right. It should just be - the sawdust should burn on top of the slabs and it'll just be coals. That's hard to explain, tell you how it does. It just smokes. Yeah, it's just the smoke.

JM: So it does smoke or smolder, but the sawdust doesn't put out the fire.

TP: No, it just holds it down. That's what it's there for. I mean that's what you use the sawdust for.

JM: Well let me get some basic outside figures, and we'll get these - we've mentioned them but let me get them in this one place. How many average fires would you have to build in a barn to get it done? I think you mentioned this, but if you could again. How many total fires? How many times do you have to fire the barn up?

TP: Depending on the year, I'd say average nine. You need - I don't think I've ever built less than six. Eight, probably on average. I've built as many as twelve.

JM: About how often do you have to build each fire? I mean how much time in between each firing?

TP: The early fires, when you're burning through, you have to check on. I know some of the older people stayed with them.

JM: Stayed with the fire?

TP: Just completely. You have to check them two or three times and build them probably ever two days. But that's just two fires. And then the one that brings the stem down, of course, it gets hot, it'll burn out in a day, or a day and a half.

JM: Oh okay.

TP: But then the finish fire, once the stems down, it just hanging there, and you've got time, you don't have to worry about it rotting or anything, so you can just build it and let it burn out, and then go back, and if you're busy doing something else, you can let it stay out a couple of days.

JM: So the finish fire burns down in about how many days?

[30:00]

TP: Four. Four to five.

JM: So this whole process on the average, again we'll talk about average, takes from - takes about how many weeks?

TP: Weeks? A month to six weeks of firing.

JM: A month to six weeks. That's the average. What's the longest time you've ever had to fire a barn?

TP: Oh gosh. Probably what I'll do - I cut one barn real early this year. And I've got it down, and I've built two or three finish fires in it, and I'm busy with the rest of the tobacco and working on the other barns because they're bringing them through, and I got watch them close. That barn I'll probably fire in there as long as I do of the rest of them, because I'll just take my time with it and now it's not in any danger, every time I get a chance I'll go in and build up a fire so I'll probably fire it for two months. But you know I won't, every time it burns out, it might not go but most a week to build it.

JM: Right. Right. Right. Well I just I ask that question because I've heard some people say they've heard of firing way up into December...

TP: Oh yeah. The late tobacco that's cut now, see, you're looking September - they'll be some tobacco cut in October probably, so they'll probably be some firing in December.

JM: Up into December?

TP: I'd like to be done firing by Thanksgiving, if I can, but I have fired after that.

JM: Well let me just check my notes real quick and make sure I've got - because I don't know enough about the process. I've got to write down what I need to know. And I think we pretty much have it covered here, except we sort of described what greening, which is what you don't want with the tobacco. Is there any way you can describe the finish. I'm really interested in this. I know that's probably the toughest thing to describe to someone who has not seen it. What does it look like when it's finished?

TP: I can show you some tobacco. I don't know how to describe it. I can show you some tobacco that I've just got the color through on - and I can go show you some more that's - and I can give you a leaf. But it's like partially finished, it's not completely finished.

JM: Right. Well let me back up then. You had a question? Okay. Let me back up just a little bit. Because I'm interested in how much...

[side A ends]

JM: This is side B of the September 25th interview with Tommy Paschall, and also I might add that his son Barry Paschall has been making some commentary, which has been useful. So I'm going to restate that question, and even if you feel, Tommy, that you can't answer it. What I'm interested in, basically, what determined how much a farmer could grow in the pre-regulation days.

TP: Labor. I mean, you're talking about before they had any chemicals to spray for works, any chemicals to spray for grass, anything - now suckers. Do you all know what suckers are?

JM: I sort of know, but you might tell us.

TP: When you top it - Tobacco you have to top, you pull the flower out of the top of it, so it will fill out, because you're trying to sell the leaves not the seed. Like most crops you're trying to sell the seed. When you pull that top out, the plants still trying to make seeds so it puts out a sucker at the joint where each leaf joins the stalk. It puts out what we call a sucker or a water sprout, and it will shoot up and try to put a seed head in it. Back when you're talking about, they didn't. Now they have sprays or oils that you oil to stop that sucker. But when you're talking about they didn't. And suckering is a big, big job. You think about that water sprout comes out on every leaf, and you've got fifteen leaves on a plant, you've got five thousand plants in an acre. You've got to walk over it.

JM: Five thousand - let me get that - five thousand plants in an acre?

TP: 4500 to 5000. Different people set different widths, but the average something like that. You've got to walk over it and pull each one of those off. And then when you pull it off, it'll grow right back again, until you cut it. And as a matter of fact, I've heard them talk before the oiling - oiling's pretty well been around since I was a kid. Now when I was a little kid it wasn't. I remember it. But I think dad probably started oiling when I was twelve or thirteen.

JM: So you remember being out there and chopping suckers (laughs)?

[35:00]

TP: I remember chopping suckers. You still have to sometimes. It doesn't always work. But they would just sucker until they got tired of suckering, and then cut it then, because I guess it would grow suckers indefinitely. They just keep coming back out and coming back out. So I'd say it was held down to three or four acres per farm, per family. Because of the labor. I mean they couldn't tend anymore.

JM: Right. Well I mean how many - I think Barry had mentioned you said gone down from twenty-five to one.

TP: Yeah, farms. Before there was twenty-five farms in 1950. There's one farm now. Ok, I grew up on a little road a mile from here and there was nine farmers a mile on it, when I was a kid. And now there's two, counting me. And one of them is one of the original nine. He's the only one still alive.

JM: So really it was the amount of labor available to a farmer in the pre-regulation days that determined how much tobacco he could or could not grow.

TP: That would've determined how much crop period he could or could not grow I'd say.

JM: Any crop?

TP: Any crop.

JM: And of course the lack of machinery I guess?

TP: Lack of machinery. Of course when you go out with a pair of mules and a breaking plow, you're not going to tend five thousand acres of corn, because you're not going to get it broken away. There's no way you can do it.

JM: Right. How much tobacco base are you working now?

TP: We do different things different years, but this year Barry and I together had five - seven and a half acres of dark, and then I've got - well my brother and I have got seven and a half acres of dark.

JM: So seven and a half acres of dark. And is it basically you two who are working, or do you try to get other people in there?

TP: We work most of the summer, now cutting - harvesting, you have to have help. We couldn't - for one thing, we couldn't run it in the barn. Because you know we talked about that earlier, you got to have five hands.

JM: You got to have five hands...

TP: Yeah, you need five hands to run it in.

JM: About five hands to run the tobacco into the barn?

TP: Yeah. Now we've try to - I've tried - both of us have tried to swap out with other local - but most of the people we swap with have got public jobs. They don't - they raise like an acre a piece, and they soon get us paid back.

JM: So you mean swap out...

TP: We help them, then they come help us.

JM: But they're not in a position to help you...

TP: All the time.

JM: All the time. Right.

TP: That's mostly family. Cousins and stuff. See I've got cousins and brother-in-laws that are - but most of them work in public work and just farm on a small scale, raise an acre or two. That's pretty good money if you can take a full time job and tend an acre of tobacco. That's pretty good sideline money to bring in.

JM: (chuckles) Pretty good bit of work too I imagine.

TP: Yeah, it is a lot of work. Now it's got to be somebody that's willing to - and usually them and their wife both.

JM: Right.

TP: And my wife work at public work, and she's during the summer every day is on the farm doing something.

JM: Well let me ask a couple of basic questions here so we can start rapping this up. Let me get some real facts here. You've already stated that there's approximately 4,500 to 5,000 plants per acre. How much does an acre translate into pounds?

TP: That's going up. With watering, more and more people are going to irrigation. It used to be ten years ago if you could get a ten, 2,000 pounds per acre, you had it pretty good. Now I have known people getting three, or they say they'll get three. I've never gotten three (laughs). But I've got up to 2,600. This year should be high because we had a lot of water. I mean you can put everything in the world on it, all the fertilizer, just like any other crop: if you don't get the water, you can't make the crop. I mean if it's dry, it's the wrong time of the year. Tobacco - dark-fire tobacco, will stand more dry weather than most anything else.

JM: Is that right? It's more rugged than the burley?

TP: Yeah, it's more rugged as far as the dry weather is concerned than the burley.

[inaudible in the background]

TP: Or corn or beans or anything else. Yes. It can especially when it's small, before it blooms, before you top it, if you can get enough water for it to not die when you transplant it, it will almost live until topping time, even if it's short. If you get rain after that, it'll go ahead and make good tobacco.

[40:00]

JM: So you can anywhere from - well the average is like 2,000 pounds per acre, maybe a little more?

TP: I'd say that's a good average.

JM: And then how many pounds can you get in the typical barn these days? Say the narrow...

TP: the old...

JM: the older type barns.

TP: Same. About an acre.

JM: You can get about an acre in a barn? Well that would seem some reasonable equations going on there with the older farmers.

TP: Probably a little over in my barns which are older barns but they're not log barns, I'd say I can average nine hundred sticks. And then an acre is making 830, 830 sticks. If it was a perfect stand. Now you're going to have...

JM: So we're talking about sticks of tobacco, between eight hundred and nine hundred in a barn, which balances out to about six plants on a stick.

TP: Six plants on a stick.

JM: This is all pretty well worked out, isn't it?

TP: Yeah. Six plants on a stick because - that's burley too and anything else - because you can spread it out and air can get to it if you got six. The sticks are - the tiers are what three foot? Did you all measure them out there?

JM: The tiers are about three foot apart. We haven't got out there yet.

TP: You figure six plants on a stick. The sticks are like thirty-six, I believe most of them are about thirty-eight or forty inches long and they hang over a little on the tiers and when you spread them out, that gives you about enough room for our smoke to go up in between them good. So six plants on average. As far as the number of sticks in the barn, it depends on the size of the tobacco too. I mean if it's a dry year, and it's little bitty tobacco, of course you can put more sticks, because you can put it closer together.

JM: Okay, well I'm not going to ask you to describe each process after you get the finish, but if you can just name each process, each thing that happens after you've got the finish, what happens after you got the right finish. Just name the steps, you don't have to describe each step.

TP: When you get through firing?

JM: When you get through firing.

TP: You take it down. It's like you put it up, except it's a lot lighter and one or two men can do it fairly easily. You've got to get it in order, now like I tried to explain earlier, order is a word that I didn't realize for years that nobody else had ever heard of except for people around here, until I'd mentioned it to somebody every once in a while, and...

JM: And they'd all get the blank look I got [laughs].

TP: Yeah. It's just pliable - makes it pliable, where it's not powder dry, where it won't break all to pieces.

JM: You just have to get some moisture back in it? Is that what we're talking about when we get the leaf back into order, we're letting it draw in some more moisture?

TP: Right.

JM: So you can handle it?

TP: I have had to spray it, but most of the time unless you have a real dry fall or early winter, it'll go ahead and come in itself. But there has been times that I've had to spray tobacco.

JM: So you get the leaf back in the order, and then the next step is...

TP: You take it down, take it off the stick, take the stocks back off the stick. Then you've got stripping, which is - each leaf is pulled off of the stock, classed, usually into lugs, seconds, and leaf, and dark, now in burley and flue-cured it's called different things, but it's still classed. But lugs are the bottom leafs, usually the ragged ones, tore-up, they've been on the ground. They're on the bottom stock closest to the ground. Seconds are a little better, not as ragged, usually a little lighter color than the leaf which is the tip leaf. It'll be a thicker and usually go a darker color. Some years I would just have made two classes. Most of the time I make three.

JM: Right. And then - so you've stripped, you've made the classes, and then the next step.

TP: Well when you strip them, you tie them up into heads, or hands. Make the heads and tie them into hands, and that's a whole other process. You'll see if you come back to look at the selling, you'll see...

JM: I'd like to.

TP: And then it sells. You take to the floor room. Now they bundle. Now when I was a kid they didn't - bundling is like - it's been around twenty-five years. They put it in bundles of 100 pounds or seventy-five pounds.

JM: What did they do before that?

TP: They just what they called booked it on wagons or in the barn and just made big squares, and then you had to get that up and they took it to floor and put it on - they set it on baskets, what they call baskets.

JM: Right, I've seen the baskets.

[45:00]

TP: And they had to pick it up and put it on the baskets. Ten or fifteen years ago I worked at the floor, and there were one farmer that came with it booked, and I don't know - he just hadn't changed. I don't know why he hadn't changed. He was an older man. Didn't accept change I guess.

JM: Right. He didn't want to change. So you got it to the sales floor. I guess at some point you get paid and you think about starting all over again.

TP: If you're doing flatbed, you've already started.

JM: [laughs]

TP: You burn the flatbeds in the fire - gas them - now mostly they gas them now. That's fairly new too, they used to burn them.

JM: So let me get that clear for anyone listening...

TP: To kill the weeds. Yeah, that's what you're doing...

JM: You haven't even sold last year's crop before you're starting on next year's - starting some process on next year's.

TP: If you drive around the country, you'll see some flatbeds already fixed.

JM: Already fixed? Wow.

TP: I saw one yesterday that's already fixed.

JM: Well it's labor intensive.

TP: It's a very labor intensive...

JM: That's an understatement when it comes to tobacco.

TP: Now they've got the mechanical setters. When you were talking about the older guys that was also setting said they set it by hand, transplanting by hand you know with a peg. So you were looking at forty-five hundred plants per acre doing that. It was very - and it's still labor intensive, not as much as it was then, but it's a very labor intensive crop.

Folklife Archives Project 476: Dark Fire Tobacco Barns

Interview with Tommy Paschall (B2, F1)

JM: Well I'm going to wrap up this interview. So this will be the end of the interview with Tommy Paschall, and some commentary from his son Barry. This is John Morgan. It's 9-25-92.

[End transcription]